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Lean, clean White House

The battle to reorganize the White House into a leaner power center is about to begin. Both protest and confusion are evident on Capitol Hill as the Executive Department feuds relentlessly about whose ox will be gored in the reorganization proposals.

Both reactions are premature because President Carter, the general committed to battling for reorganization of the huge Federal bureaucracy, hasn't even seen the studies and options on which a special staff is putting the final touches. The study for reorganizing 18 White House offices, their 1700 full-time employees and the \$80 billion budget is due tomorrow or Thursday.

Recommendations for reorganization in other areas of the bureaucracy such as environment and natural resources, human resources and civil rights are still a long way off. The President is expected to announce shortly which of these areas (there may be others) will have first priority.

But skirmishes have begun nonetheless. A national news story this week asserted that the President intends to reduce the Office of Telecommunications Policy (OTP) or at least shift its functions by moving a reduced staff into the Commerce Department.

Either move would reflect the President's campaign promise to restore cabinet government to the executive branch. But congressmen, operating under the dubious assumption that a White House office means easy access to the President, immediately objected to the idea.

The OTP earned a reputation for nastiness — as well as ignorance — under the Nixon Administration when its first director, Clay T. Whitehead, charged that public and commercial newscasters and commentators were

biased. Since then the OTP has hosted consultants, study groups and interest groups whose purpose has been to guide the future of telecommunications policy in the age of satellites, cable television, telephone competition, network uncertainty as to what constitutes appropriate television fare as well as the future of public television in America.

These are important questions on which the President ought to have first-class advice. It may be that he can get it better with fewer people and less money by eliminating the OTP. In that case — in fact, in all the reorganization effort — the hope is that the President will not just shift people elsewhere in the bureaucracy but pare government down for maximum efficiency and economy.

Another skirmish is being fought behind closed doors but at such a level of dissonance that everybody on Capitol Hill is listening.

Central Intelligence director Stanfield Turner wants to incorporate the National Reconnaissance Office (once the super-secret Air Force spy organization) and the National Security Agency under the budgetary wing of the intelligence community. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown wants to keep them at Defense. Capitol Hill observers expect a major battle on this front.

The problem with these conflicts is that they threaten to limit the President's options before he even has the options in front of him. Carter made executive reorganization a priority of his Administration. He fought hard to get congressional authority to do the job properly. He should have the liberty to examine the options and make his own recommendations for a leaner, cleaner White House.